

Introduction

Metaphor, Method, and the Three “Sources” of Hagiographic Narrative

An overarching metaphor, a set of key methodological tools, and a brief overview of background themes lay out the broad landscape of the exploration to come.

DECODING THE ABRAHAMIC GENOME

At the core of their common Abrahamic patrimonies, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam share five dominant faith-genes: (1) belief in *one lone creator* of all, who (2) *communicates* with gratuitous beneficence (3) through *human intermediaries* (4) a *word* that these messengers pass along as *scriptures* and that (5) subsequent generations further *develop in oral and postscriptural written tradition*. Here the critical role of prophets and their descendants—Sages, Saints, and Friends of God—is the “middle gene.” All three faith communities revere individual human messenger-intermediaries at the nexus of the divine-human interface not only as God’s spokespeople, but as ethical and religious exemplars. Despite their often glaring imperfections, these men and women represent the best of God’s creation, and they in turn become models for subsequent generations of exemplars. Though they may be centuries removed from their forebears, Jews, Christian, and Muslims have continued to regard these spiritual descendants of the prophets as worthy of admiration and, at least in some respects, imitation. *Crossing Confessional Boundaries* offers a version of the extended history of these religious heroes in their role as carriers of the Abrahamic DNA, and thus as facilitators of interfaith relationships across many centuries.¹

Why hagiography? In its most generic sense, hagiography denotes “stories of holy ones.” As these chapters will describe in greater detail, all three Abrahamic traditions

have enshrined narratives of religious exemplars in a wide variety of literary forms and genres. These treasures of religious heroism and lore offer an extraordinarily rich entrée to the humanity, warmth, wit, personal magnetism, and approachability of its main subjects. As the title of this book implies, many of these exemplars have historically functioned as personages of considerable cross-traditional interest—as “hinges” on doors that typically swing both ways. Sites associated with them have drawn together members of diverse faith communities whose respective adherents have so often perceived one another as irreconcilably alien. Exemplars have the kind of broad appeal that can cut through divisions by virtue of both their flawed humanity and the courageous commitment they model in transcending their limitations. Hagiographic sources represent much more than merely a record of devotional models or the stuff of “spiritual reading.” As religious literature, hagiographic texts enshrine aspects of the world’s diverse Islams, Christianities, and Judaisms available in scarcely any other complex of genres and themes. But beyond that, this literature, as well as the institutional, social, and cultural contexts from which it has arisen, also affords unique theological insights into the interlocking histories of the Abrahamic faiths. This topic not only represents an accessible way of inviting readers into these global traditions, but presents an appealing entrée to an important common ground on which Muslims, Jews, and Christians can break down barriers of suspicion and fear. Religious exemplars, as these traditions preserve them in story and devotion, are typically perceived as less threatening than outright polemic and can appeal directly to the humane values of people of good will.

ESSENTIAL CONCEPTS

Before taking a quick overflight of the three wellsprings of exemplary religious lore (culture, scripture, and postscriptural Tradition), some essential theoretical background will help provide methodological orientation and basic tools for appreciating the boundary-crossing capabilities of exemplars and their stories.

A key to understanding the dynamics of the multilayered cross-traditional ownership of a rich variety of exemplary figures is the concept of “collective memory.” Maurice Halbwachs observes that religious and cultural collective memory “obeys the same laws as every collective memory: it does not preserve the past but reconstructs it with the aid of the material traces, rites, texts and traditions left behind by the past.” Such memory is flexible and expansive enough to absorb and repurpose not only elements of a given tradition’s *own* past, but those of significantly different identities as well, reframing them in service of forging a *new* identity grounded in an ever more ancient and therefore more authoritative past.

A companion concept is that of “hybridity.” As a comparative-theological category, it suggests how religious and cultural traditions make room for otherwise alien inheritances by *de facto*—though rarely acknowledged as such—compromise in

service of survival. Hybridity is, in addition, an ingredient inherent in the very process of supersessionism that characterizes the relationships of Christianity to Judaism and of Islam to both Christianity and Judaism.² From another perspective, hybridity is a way of acknowledging that, at least in terms of historical evolution, transitions from one obviously kindred tradition to another cannot be tidily demarcated.³ This is particularly evident in the complex relationships among the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament, and the Qur'an, as well as in the diverse identities and functions of individual personages shared by two or more of the Abrahamic sacred texts.⁴

Two other large religio-cultural (as well as political) dynamics figure most prominently in these chapters: Christianization and Islamization. Scholars of Middle Eastern multiconfessional religious history have been producing welcome new research on the nature and extent of formal shifts in creedal allegiance among resident populations, especially to and from both Christianity and Islam. Here I add two new concepts, "syncretism" and "zones of contact," and suggest important further implications of hybridity and hybridization. These will play a crucial role especially in the final segments of the first three chapters ("Community").

Acknowledging Christianization's temporal priority over Islamization across the region, I begin with insights from David Frankfurter's *Christianizing Egypt: Syncretism and Local Worlds in Late Antiquity*. Frankfurter compares processes of Christianization in Egypt with the parallels elsewhere in the Roman Empire, a key component of which is "reimagining religious landscape" by recasting architecture especially in relation to processional requirements and ritual needs more broadly. Frankfurter foregrounds the notion of *syncretism* as a distinctive product of the Egyptian context, suggesting this working definition: an "inevitable and continuous process by which a religion is 'acculturated,' selective incorporation of ritual and defining sacred space in the environment in effect re-conceives the most ancient and enduring features of ancient Egyptian culture." He argues that, contrary to recent tendencies to replace syncretism with the concepts of "hybridity" and "hybridization," syncretism retains its utility as an "experimental assemblage, not a fixed and harmonious melding of ideas." He calls "holy persons" "instruments of syncretism" by functioning as "regional prophets" who provided "crucial syntheses of Christianity such that the new religion could be understood." Devotees of these "saints" bring preconceptions of "powerful place" that orient indigenous populations toward these holy persons.⁵

Hybridity and hybridization retain their utility here, nonetheless. Kate Holland offers useful suggestions that one can adapt from research on world literature and in the context of postcolonial discourse. She describes hybridization—whether spontaneous, organic, and unconscious, or systematic and intentional—as a result of cross-traditional formulation of mutually acceptable moral and spiritual paradigms. I suggest that, from this perspective, the concept is applicable to Abrahamic heroes and saints in the Late Antique and early medieval Mediterranean world. Such processes

of “melding” can, and often do, coexist with the persistence of older beliefs and codes even as personifications of new ethical and religious values gain popularity among a host population.⁶

Largely agreeing with Holland’s understanding that hybridization typically occurs at the boundaries rather than at the center of a culture, Mario Apostolov argues persuasively for replacing descriptors of physical-geographical spaces (such as frontier, border, and territory) in which syncretism and hybridization occur with “contact zones” and their “boundaries.” These designations are more capacious and flexible, encompassing acceptable behavior, speech, and the sense of “personal space.” The present book’s title reflects this perspective. Although Apostolov’s research applies more directly to the world of modern nation-states, I believe his conceptual framework is adaptable to this context as well. It acknowledges that throughout history, political maps have represented a small fraction of what one needs to know of the cross-traditional interactions of Muslim, Christian, and other faith communities across the late ancient and medieval Mediterranean. Arguably more influential still, Apostolov suggests, are the psychological constructions and cultural preconceptions at play in the meeting of these communities.⁷

An important result of these terminological refinements is the ability to describe more effectively the “blurry line” between, for example, cultural assimilation and religious “conversion.” In a similar vein, Christian Sahner prefers the terms “engagement” and “affiliation” to talk of conversion, since shifting of allegiance was an “ebb and flow” along a spectrum of creedal affiliations.⁸ Richly detailed studies are increasingly supplanting long-entrenched assumptions of rapid, wholesale, and typically forced conversion with more nuanced analyses of both the means and the motives of all involved parties.⁹ Throughout this study it will be essential to bear in mind that neither Christianization nor Islamization inherently implies a widespread—let alone precipitous—transfer of religious allegiance. In many instances these dynamics have left considerable scope for continuity of religious belief and practice under Christian or Muslim *administrative* rule, sometimes for centuries post-Conquest.

Such, in sum, are the issues at stake in appreciating the “boundary-crossing” capabilities and role of the religious exemplars of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Individual chapters will refine and augment these methodological markers. What follows is a brief sample of the three principal wellsprings of the stories and lore of these incredibly versatile Abrahamic religious heroes.

A TRILOGY OF SOURCES: ABRAHAMIC EXEMPLARS IN CULTURE, SCRIPTURE, AND TRADITION

At the root of the rich proliferation of religious heroism in the Abrahamic faith communities are intertwined manifestations of *culture* and folk heroes, the *scrip-*

tural portrayal and development of the personalities of founding heroes (Prophets and Patriarchs), and the role of *tradition* as a repository of heroic followers (Sages, Saints, and Friends of God). This preliminary overview lays the groundwork for a more detailed exploration of the interrelationships among these three dimensions in the stories and roles of some major exemplar-*types* in Jewish, Christian, and Islamic religious literature.

Many striking examples of the kind of “reclamation and recycling” mentioned above emerge from a study of Abrahamic religiously heroic figures as they filter through the permeable membranes of culture, scriptural intertextuality, and post-scriptural tradition alike. By way of general background, here are just a few prime samples of major characters who have survived and been reinterpreted through that wonderfully complex process of filtration. A seminal theoretical concept in the following examples is that of “sacred patterning” (to be detailed further in chapter 5) through which Jewish, Christian, and Muslim exemplars grow in stature by association with earlier paradigms—sometimes scriptural, sometimes based on previous hagiographical sources.

Religion, Culture, and the Folk Hero

Intriguing characters too often relegated to the sidelines of contemporary religious studies have long populated the shadowy realm of the mythic, folkloric, archetypal interstices between and among religious traditions. Though they are rarely acknowledged as “core” members of major communities of faith, these protean perennials are nonetheless essential to an understanding of the complex dynamics of interreligious connectedness. My purpose here is to lay the groundwork for this exploration’s three main parts, setting a broad religious/cultural context. At issue are manifold ways in which folk and religious traditions have generated, nurtured, preserved, and disseminated a wide variety of potent paradigms that embody both ancient religious, and even older, cultural values. Like other “endangered species” unappreciated until scientists detail the domino-effect implications of their impending disappearance for “higher forms” of life, they, it turns out, are not expendable but foundational. These characters can reveal surprising secrets about the millennial, enduring but permeable interfaces between communities that typically present themselves as immutable, insular, and self-sufficient.

Among the more irresistible charms of these figures is their intimate association with the very stuff of material creation. They inhabit or frequent caves, springs and other water features, groves of trees, mountains, and numinously mesmerizing rock formations. For those who are willing to resist the temptation to dismiss such personages as delusions of the credulous, they can wondrously anchor all things religious and exemplary in what the three Abrahamic traditions call the Book of Nature—as revelatory as scripture or the touch of the divine in the depths of the self. The powers they wield—for healing and comforting, vivifying and

slaying, avenging and vanquishing—are most often intimately associated with those signature places and the sacred topographies they map out. Like the very energy at the heart of all mystery, these personages are limited by neither time nor space—nor, it seems, by confessional boundaries. Since their archetypal confraternity includes shape-shifters and tricksters, they are often dangerously liminal. They both invite others to walk on the wild side of spiritual potency and goad the reform-minded into raising the alarm of syncretism (or worse!) in hopes of scouring away the barnacles of popular belief and superstition.

Since religious folk-heroes typically straddle a line between frank make-believe and garden-variety historicity, one can hardly talk of exemplarity in their life stories. On the other hand, many of the real-life men and women who embody the central beliefs and values of Jewish, Christian, and Islamic faith share strikingly similar attributes with their legendary counterparts. During the course of the present study, the frequently incompatible qualities of admirability and imitability, legend and fact, will present themselves in various contexts. Here I will introduce key examples of the more ubiquitous denizens of the symbolic spaces beyond the pale of organized, institutional religion.¹⁰

Three of these archetypal personalities provide useful illustrations of two important aspects of our subject. They suggest both the most obvious confessional associations of the individual figures and the mobility of such symbolic characters across confessional boundaries. They are Elijah, George, and Khidr. Elijah, a major player in both the Hebrew scriptures and Jewish spirituality, is also numbered in the Qur'an (as Ilyas) among Islamic tradition's succession of prophets. Jewish tradition emphasizes Elijah's role as a very early prophet—a term applied somewhat more restrictively in Jewish-Christian than in Islamic usage. By contrast the Qur'an calls prophets a whole range of figures identified in the Hebrew Bible as patriarchs, judges, and kings. One of Elijah's signature attributes is that, though he was born, he did not die but was taken to the next world in a fiery chariot. Like Khidr, one of his hallmarks is that he materializes whenever and wherever circumstances require his presence.¹¹

George, whom none of the scriptures mentions, has his origins in Christian lore, where he begins his life apparently as a more ordinary kind of historical personage. Khidr, like George, appears by name in none of the scriptures, but Islamic exegetes very early on named Khidr as the mysterious guide of Moses (whose unnamed companion Muslim exegetes later identified as Joshua) in quest of the "confluence of the two seas."¹² George's Turkish parallels appear in the hybrid *Hidrellez*—a conflation of Khidr (symbol of life, springs, and patron of seafarers) and Ilyas (associated with solar symbolism and thus resurrection, and patronage of land travelers).¹³ According to medieval Muslim lore George shared with Khidr and Ilyas the gift of deathlessness: though George's unbelieving people killed him seventy times, he continually came back to life.

As types of the religious folk hero, members of this trio run the gamut, from warrior and protector (especially George) to trickster, from wisdom figure to spiritual guide. Ancient Middle Eastern tradition also pairs Khidr with Ilyas as “brothers,” and finds them together at the Water of Life. Khidr means “green,” linking the mysterious chap with water, fertility, and all things verdant and regenerative.¹⁴ Tradition also associates both Elijah and Khidr with the conferral of spiritual authority. In the Book of Kings (2 Kings 1–25) Elijah passes the mantle of his prophetic office to Elisha, and in some late ancient dream narratives Elijah appears to important Muslim figures with revelatory messages.¹⁵ In Islamic tradition, Khidr has long functioned as the “spirit initiator” of Sufi shaykhs, upon whom he bestows the mantle called the *khirqā*. The pair will reappear in these roles and more in later chapters, particularly in part 1, thanks to their cross-traditional paradigmatic character in the three geographical regions explored there.¹⁶

Scriptural Narratives and Canons of Religious Heroism

Abraham functions as the “father in faith” for all three traditions. Viewed through the frame of the classic heroic narrative of quest and test, Abraham’s story, along with that of Moses, represents one of the most complete narrative cycles of the type. A common major feature of their two stories is the call to leave home and make a fresh start relying only on trust in God. In Abraham’s case, the culmination of the journey is the forging of an identity as a people, while for Moses the story is about rescuing and renewing the hopes of that people under a single divine mandate and in a land of their own.¹⁷

Christianity’s scriptural patrimony acknowledges the fatherhood of Abraham, while a number of important texts cast Jesus in the role of a New Moses. He, too, is summoned to journey, now across the terrain of the land whose conquest was the final episode in Moses’s life (though he himself did not live to experience it). Abraham and Moses play similar roles in the Qur’an, though that scripture characteristically introduces their stories piecemeal, in brief homiletical reminders rather than in longer unified narratives. Like both of those exemplars, Muhammad receives a call to journey from home to a new land (the *hijra*, emigration from Mecca to Medina). Like Moses (and all other prophets), Muhammad was a shepherd before God commissioned him as prophet-messenger at the highly symbolic age of forty. And, as in the case of Jesus, Moses’s role as lawgiver is a prime analogy to Muhammad’s foundational function. The Qur’an also calls Abraham a “beautiful example” to Muhammad, in that the ancient prophet was the *original model* of both the “true monotheist” seeker after the One God (*hanif*) and “one who surrenders totally” to God (i.e., the first *muslim*). Muslim Sufi poets often refer to Abraham as the paradigmatic mystic/lover of God—his honorific name *Khalil* means “intimate friend”—whose sighs of desire for God caused his heart to bubble audibly.

Among cross-traditional *scriptural* religious heroes, arguably the most versatile and multifaceted is Moses. Surveying the broad spectrum of his personae in the Abrahamic faiths, one finds a remarkable array of cultural and “mythico-legendary” metamorphoses. To begin, the biblical account of the Exodus is one of the world’s oldest “epic” accounts, featuring Moses as Hero, a status he enjoys in spite of his earlier murder of an Egyptian. Early portents of a heroic destiny include a marvelous birth and survival, hints of a near-orphanhood, rescue and survival in the house of the very monarch whose decree had threatened the infant’s life, and marriage to the daughter of a man of status among the Midianites (a people who had played a role in the rescue of Joseph). Moses’s heroic evolution culminated in his elevation to the “royal” role of lawgiver, and ended in his mysterious death on a mountaintop resulting in his burial in an unknown location (though more than a few Middle Eastern sites have been claimed). This “epic of Moses” shows signs of ancient Near Eastern lore, including tales of the birth of the storied ruler Sargon, whose unidentified father was rumored to be divine, and whose priestess mother set her infant son afloat on the Euphrates, soon to be plucked to safety by a gardener. In his purifying experience of trials by desert and his encounter with God at Sinai, Moses becomes a multivalent paradigm: of the Byzantine and Syriac monk as well as of Muhammad, whom God tested in his solitary meditations in a desert-mountain cave near Mecca, and of many of the greatest Sufis.

Moses is perhaps best known as a liberator, releasing his people from pharaonic bondage and securing a homeland at length after confronting the very monarch in whose palace he had been raised. In addition to his role as lawgiver, as a distinctly *religious* hero, Moses functions as a *mediator* between divine and human realms, and a *prophet*, in whom Islamic tradition sees a major model for Muhammad. For Christian Syriac authors contemporary with Muhammad, Moses’s legislative prerogatives also played a signal role. Small but important “mystical” constituencies in Jewish, Christian, and Islamic history have focused on the arcane, esoteric dimensions of Moses’s privileged access to divine law as “God’s interlocutor” (*kalim Allah*) and highlighted the wondrous powers inherent in the miracles associated especially with his staff.¹⁸ In Islamic Sufi traditions, however, Moses comes up second-best in esoteric knowledge, failing to measure up to his sometime-guide, Khidr, in privileged access to “knowledge from God Himself” (*ilm min ladunn*).¹⁹

*Hagiography: Postscriptural Traditions of
Heroism Modeled on Foundational Figures*

Though all three Abrahamic traditions share variations on the belief that their sacred scriptures represent a summative revelation, ideals of spiritual heroism have been recognized virtually without ceasing in the lives of individuals judged to be worthy successors to their founding fathers and mothers. Regarded as prime custodians of their respective patrimonies in diverse ways, these figures become

the subject of libraries full of hagiographical works whose purpose is to distill in their narratives the qualities deemed (in a given cultural context) most emblematic of the essence of the faith tradition in question. Here is a brief overview of the major themes in the evolution of the key hagiographic concepts, with brief allusions to a few important exemplars from each Abrahamic tradition.

Jewish Hagiography: Robert L. Cohn offers this working definition of the term “saint” in a Judaic context:

[A] type of religious authority who is both a model for imitation and an object for veneration. A saint so perfectly enfleashes the ideals and values of a religion that he or she becomes holy in a distinctive way. The life of the saint acts as a parable for others, a beacon leading to fullness of life. The sanctity of the saints inspires other people to follow them, usually by dwelling piously on their stories (hagiography) and cultically revering their memory (hagiolatry).²⁰

Cohn makes it clear that Jewish traditions about exemplary figures do not associate any figure with observances on particular “feast days,” and rarely involve ritual attendance at shrines or tombs; that community takes precedence over individual piety (thus obviating any need for mediatorial figures); and that “saintly” personages play virtually no role as inspirations toward conversion to Judaism (as they often do in other traditions). Biblical accounts, Cohn observes further, are not strictly hagiographical in that their function is to illustrate the figure’s place in Israel’s history rather than to exalt the individual. Many Jewish scholars have generally shared Cohn’s overall assessment that the term “hagiography” as applied to other traditions is not a useful category with respect to Judaism. Scholarly opinion on the subject has begun to change recently, however, and there is ample reason for including Judaic material in the present exploration. Not least among those reasons is that while biblical accounts do not hesitate to point out embarrassing imperfections and ethical lapses of the greatest, they also pointedly celebrate their exemplarity in matters of devotion, wisdom, humility, and compassion.²¹

Postbiblical accounts take a noticeably more hagiographical turn. Building on biblical accounts of paradigmatic personalities, Rabbinic scholars whose foundational efforts eventuated in the Mishnah and the two Talmuds (Jerusalem/Palestinian and Babylonian/Iraqi) began to reinterpret those scriptural exemplars for changing times and circumstances. Some of those very scholars eventually became the subject of hagiographical accounts that evaluated the individual’s importance in terms of their compatibility with, or likeness to, major biblical figures. Thus begins the closest Jewish *analog* to the hagiographical type called the Righteous One (*Zaddiq*, sometimes rendered “saintly person”). Throughout the present study, references to the *zaddiq* will follow the lead of Arthur Green’s description:

A unique individual, a wonderman from birth, heir to the biblical traditions of charismatic prophecy as embodied in Moses and Elijah, and at the same time the rabbinic

version of the Hellenistic god-man or quasi-divine hero. It is in the former sense primarily that Joseph is the archetypical *zaddiq*: his righteousness is acquired through suffering, and passes its greatest test in his conquest of passion when confronting the advances of Potiphar's wife. In the latter sense, it is rather Moses who is the ideal type, recognized from birth as containing the hidden light of creation or as being the bearer of the divine presence in the world.²²

Early postbiblical Jewish narratives celebrate a number of revered rabbis credited with heroic deeds that advanced the cause of the community in the face of enormous threats. Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai, trapped in Jerusalem as the Romans besieged the city (66–70 CE), is said to have been spirited away in a coffin, but very much alive. Brought before the General Vespasian, Yohanan revealed to him that he would soon be proclaimed Roman emperor. After Vespasian confirmed the rabbi's prediction, he granted the teacher his one wish: to be given a place to found an academy that would preserve Jewish tradition, at Jabneh (or Jamnia in Galilee, northern present-day Israel). We will encounter other major rabbis in due course.

Christian hagiography begins with two influential late-second or early-third-century martyrologies: the anonymous *Martyrdom of Polycarp* (d. 155), about the bishop of Smyrna in western Anatolia (now the Turkish city of Izmir), and the *Passion of Perpetua and Felicity* (c. 203) of Carthage. The subgenre of martyrology assumed its initial importance in the context of generations of Roman persecution. Christian eschatological notions of death, judgment, reward, and punishment played an essential role in shaping the narratives and creating a style of propopography distinct from models already available in Graeco-Roman religious lore and practice. Martyrs "witnessed" to complete devotion to the "name of Jesus Christ," preferring brief torment here to interminable suffering hereafter. In addition, early martyrological accounts provide evidence of the beginnings, not only of a distinct category of martyrs called saints (holy ones), but of the tradition of a calendar of observances centered on the death anniversary and site enshrining the saint's remains. Thus began a kind of retroactive quest for relics, ushering in the establishment of networks of pilgrimage goals and a tradition of saintly intercession, all institutionalized in the new organizing concept of the Canon of Saints. Eventually joining the feminine company of Felicity and Perpetua were a host of other martyred women such as Agnes, Cecilia, and Lucy.

As Christianity expanded under its newfound imperial patronage, so did the cult of martyrs and the narrative genre of the martyrology. As the mid-fourth century saw the end of the age of persecution, broader whole-life hagiographical narratives began to appear, signaling and fostering an appreciation of new spiritual exemplars. Athanasius of Alexandria (d. 373) penned the story of pioneering Egyptian desert father St. Antony (d. 356). He modeled an asceticism whose rigors won it the moniker "white martyrdom," and began a long tradition of Christian

intentional (i.e., monastic) communities.²³ At least partly under the impetus of such narratives, monastic life rapidly spread eastward to Syria and as far west as the Iberian Peninsula.²⁴

Two authors of important works of the time deserve particular mention here. Cappadocian father Gregory of Nyssa (335–94) authored a work titled *The Life of Moses*, which reflected on the spiritual symbolism of the Old Testament figure's exemplary virtues, and which was a work of philosophical theology rather than biography as such. Jerome (ca. 345–420) also developed Judaic material, integrating important pre-Christian figures into the panoply of exemplars.²⁵ Other Fathers of the Church further developed key aspects of an expanding hagiographical tradition. An exemplar of another kind, Ambrose of Milan (ca. 339–97), mentor of Augustine (354–430), became a paragon of stalwart erudition in the battle against heterodoxy as he fought the Arian heresy. Like many other saints of the age, Athanasius, Ambrose, and Augustine were bishops, members of an expanding cadre of ecclesiastical saints. A significant theme in the lives of several such individuals was that of conversion—Augustine being perhaps the best known of these, thanks to his *Confessions*. During the later fifth and sixth centuries, narratives of western Christian heroism revolved to a great extent around the struggle against invading forces moving into the political vacuum left by a deteriorating Rome—Attila and company, the Vandals, and the Germans. One of the more intriguing of these was a kind of precursor of Joan of Arc, Geneviève of Paris (d. 502), who as a “consecrated virgin” roused the public to resist the Huns in 451. Over the sixth and seventh centuries, Central European hagiography featured, and was sometimes even written by, women, generally in leadership positions of religious orders (thus abbesses paralleled the preponderance of bishops among male saints of the era). The outward struggle in which these exemplars played important roles was often described as the obverse of an ongoing contest of orthodoxy against heresies both ancient and upstart. Among the most persistent of those was Arianism, with long-range impact on both Christianity and Islam in the Iberian Peninsula. Chapter 2 will pick up the regional story of Andalusia and the Maghrib against the backdrop of the fate of post-Roman Christian North Africa and Spain in the age of Isidore of Seville.

Islamic Hagiography: Just under a century after Muhammad's death the first biography of the Prophet appeared. Including brief mentions about the Companions as well, in the context of Muhammad's central activities and relationships, the “life story” (*sira*) would become a foundational text of Islamic prosopography. Not long after Ibn Ishaq completed that work, another important early Islamic genre evolved. It was the biographical dictionary that would function as a quasi-model for what eventually emerged as true hagiography, all in the course of scholarly efforts to gather and preserve in writing the previously oral tradition of Hadith—sayings of and anecdotes about the Prophet. Tradition dictated that all who

memorized Hadith had first to master the list of transmitters credited with passing a given saying down, attaching the body or text of the saying itself at the end of that chain. In the process of gathering thousands of remembered versions of these sayings across vast distances and multiple cultural settings, the scholars needed a way to verify the veracity of *all* individuals in the list, for no chain is stronger than its weakest link. They therefore devised a way of classifying transmitters according to trustworthiness, giving a corresponding ranking to the attached Hadiths. Scholars amassed biographical sketches by the many hundreds, many providing basic data about individuals long revered for their virtue and piety as well as their incorruptible sense of responsibility in preserving sacred tradition.

An important prose genre that first appeared in the ninth century, the universal history, ensconced the tales of Muhammad and his predecessor prophets in a broader context. On the wide canvas of world events that stretched from the Middle East through East Asia, Muhammad took his place at the pinnacle of a genealogy stretching back to Adam. But among the earliest Islamic texts with a truly hagiographic feel is a genre known as “Tales of the Prophets” (*Qisas al-Anbiya*). These began to appear in the eleventh century and over the subsequent centuries Arabic versions were supplemented by Persian and Turkish as well. Many—but by no means all—of the individuals featured in these works are explicitly mentioned in the Qur’an. Much in the manner of classic Jewish *midrash* (imaginative embellishment of ancient narratives), the “Tales” literature picks up scriptural (or oral) allusions and elaborates on them, often at considerable length. For example, although the Qur’an speaks of the prophet Zakariya, father of Yahya (John the Baptist), it does not discuss his death as a martyr. Here postscriptural tradition notes with considerable interest how unbelievers hunted Zakariya down and, as he hid in a hollow tree trunk, sawed him in two. Numerous versions of this genre in a dozen languages present generally very similar accounts of largely the same list of characters, with some regional variations in cast of characters and folkloric detail.

With the rise of Sufi communities, first informally (from the eighth century) and eventually assuming formal institutional dimensions (from the eleventh century on), a more authentically hagiographical genre emerged. Early bio-anthologies, similar in form to the dictionaries produced by Hadith scholars as the fundamental research tool in the “science of men,” furnished edifying recollections of spiritual exemplars in genealogical chains tracing Sufi teachers back to Followers and Companions, and even to Muhammad himself. As major Sufi leaders gained notoriety with the expansion of their communities, monographs dedicated to the life story of a single figure became more common. Since many of these spiritual guides and founders of Sufi orders were increasingly regarded as exemplars beyond the institutional confines of their organizations, their stories and the spiritual family trees associated with their disciples became the stuff of the genre commonly known as “Tales of God’s Friends” (*Qisas al-Awliya*).²⁶

A word about the vocabulary of Islamic hagiography will be helpful here. The Arabic *wali*, translated throughout as “Friend of God,” has as one of its primary meanings “protégé,” someone who enjoys the protection of a powerful patron. Derived from that term are the substantive nouns *walaya* and *wilaya*. One scholar distinguishes the terms by suggesting that *walaya* refers to the nature/essence of a person’s sainthood while *wilaya* connotes the actions of the saint as experienced by others, that is, “the outward visage” of Friendship with God. As an “inward reality” *walaya* appears more typically in the context of the epistemological concerns of more speculative Sufism; *wilaya* relates to “outward” manifestations of spiritual power.²⁷